

#218 WILLIAM ERMOLOVICH: USS *WHITNEY*

Steven Haller (SH): My name is Steven Haller and we're here at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel in Honolulu, Hawaii. It's December 5, 1991, at 7:15 p.m. And I'm speaking with Mr. William, "Bill" . . .

William Ermolovich (WE): William, "Bill."

SH: William Ermolovich. Mr. Ermolovich was a Shipfitter Third Class on the destroyer tender *WHITNEY*. He was a twenty year old man . . .

WE: When the war broke out.

SH: . . . when the war broke out on the, on the, on that day. We're doing this tape for the USS *ARIZONA* National Historical Site oral history program, in cooperation with KHET-TV. And I'd like to thank you very much for being with us today . . .

WE: You're welcome.

SH: . . . sharing some of your memories.

WE: Sure, it's my pleasure.

SH: Good. Could you tell us about how you got into the Navy?

WE: Yes, well, I was born in Old Forge, Pennsylvania. That's in the anthracite coal mining district of Pennsylvania. I finished high school, 1939, and this was still in the depression era. And that area, area was really depressed. So I kind of wandered around looking for work. Finally, I had a close relative that was very friendly with the superintendent at one of the steel mills in the Philadelphia area. So they hired me and the job I had was shoveling buckshot, in the steel mill. They used the buckshot for sandblasting. And I got acquainted with the superintendent pretty well, and he as an old Navy man. So during my lunch breaks, we would sit, you know, and he convinced me, maybe I ought to try the Navy.

So being in the Philadelphia area, where I was working, I went to the recruiting office, and since my home was in the Stratton, Pennsylvania area, I visited the recruiting office. Took my physical and they gave me several weeks to get things ready. Finally I was told to report to Philadelphia. This was September 25, 1940. And we got there and there weren't room for us, and I can't think of the officer's name. He says, "All you recruits step forward and take your oath of allegiance."

Well, for a moment there I, I was stunned. He says, "Darryl," he said, "did you have that two taken care of?"

I said, "What?" I completely forgot.

So he says, "Well, you don't have to step forward if you don't," you know, "if you don't want to."

So he gave me like five seconds to decide whether or I wanted to go in. So anyway, I decided well, I'm here, there's a reason why I'm here and that was

the beginning. From there, we went up, we took a ferryboat up to Newport, Rhode Island.

After eight weeks of boot camp, they sent us out to San Diego and -- now, this is 1940 again. I boarded the USS *HELM*, which was a destroyer, and I would say probably around the first of December. And we headed up the coast of California, picked up the cruisers and battleships and we headed out. And there were thirty of us recruits and the ground swells were so terrific, twenty-nine out of the thirty got seasick. So we wouldn't dare go below decks. And the old Navy men would always approach us, they knew we were sick. They said, "How about big, greasy pork chop right now?"

Well, anyway, they had stored the oranges and the grapefruit on the after deckhouse. And that's where the twenty-nine of us stayed and we went through every grapefruit and every orange, and every apple. So anyway, we arrived in Pearl Harbor approximately, it could have been the day before, day after December 7. I like to just say that it was December 7, because it was actually a year.

SH: Before . . .

WE: Yeah.

SH: . . . the attack.

WE: But it could have been a day or two before, or day or two after, right.

SH: This is December 7 . . .

WE: Of 1940.

SH: . . . 1940.

WE: Exactly.

SH: Oh, okay.

WE: So we got into Pearl Harbor and I was transferred almost immediately to the USS *WHITNEY*. I went aboard the *WHITNEY*, and of course we're all recruits, just plain old seamen. The first work they gave us was chip and paint, and polishing the brightwork, scrubbing the decks every morning about six, with holystone -- little piece of abrasive with a little hole in the indentation, and with a broom handle. And we had one of the boys or one of the seamen sprinkle sand on it, and then we had a guy with a great big hose, pouring the salt water. And so we just went ahead and anyway, that was my first job.

Then almost within a week or two, they asked if anybody was interested in playing baseball. And boy, I just lighted up. That was me. Never played professional ball, no semi-pro, and back during the depression, there were what we call sandlot baseball, amateur ball. And that's what we did, continuously.

So anyway, the following week, went out to the ball park and I watched the team practice. So when I saw 'em practice, I said, "This is not for me. These guys are just too good."

Really, they were professionals. Finally, they says, "All right now, all you new people, you get out there. Select a position you think you'd like the play."

And of course, I was kind of small, weighed a hundred thirty-five, hundred forty, I was kind of wiry. I wasn't fast, but I was quick and I kind of had a scent for where the ball was going to be.

So we practiced and the coach, the manager was a man called "Termite" McCann. He was, he'd been in the Navy for twenty years and so he was getting a little old and they needed a third baseman.

So anyway, after a while, they'd come out and talk to me. The first question was, "Are you a professional baseball player?"

And I was stunned. I said, "Gee, they must be pulling my leg or something." I says, "No."

"Were you a college baseball player?"

I says, "No."

"Well, what did you play?"

I said, "Just sandlot baseball."

So anyway, they needed a third baseman. The shortstop was a man named Dougherty. And I believe, from hearsay, that he played for the Binghamton team of the old New York-Pennsylvania league, which was -- back in those days, that was pretty tough competition.

Incidentally, I just found out that he was killed after he left the WHITNEY. He was on a destroyer and . . .

Okay, well anyway, they put me on third base and I had competition. There was a college kid playing, wanted to play, you know, wanted to make the ball team. His name was Amatto from Philadelphia. I said, "Uh-oh, here's a college kid. I have no chance."

But anyway, they selected me and they worked me, and worked me, and worked me. So finally, okay, I got selected. But the crowning glory was, say, two or three days later, they said, they had me -- equipment man come up from Honolulu. Now, you gotta remember this. Being in Pennsylvania, you didn't have much money. We used baseballs. We'd get the old baseballs where the cover was torn off, and we used friction tape to tape it. Broken baseball bats, we'd put a few nails in it, then all right, okay. And that's where I went. And then, like I said, the crowning glory was when this equipment come out and he says, "Okay, pick out your baseball bats, your gloves, your shoes, everything, and uniforms."

And it so happened that the uniforms were identical to what the Cincinnati Reds in the National League were using. Okay.

Well then, that was, okay, that's part of that part now, okay? Well, this went on during '41.

SH: Mm-hm.

WE: And eventually, you know, December 7 came, being a Sunday morning and usually played baseball Sundays. In fact, we played at the Honolulu Stadium, which is not there any more.

Sunday morning, we'd sleep in and eat early, take, take the motor launch in to Mary's Point, I believe. The bus to the Honolulu Stadium, and then we'd play the various teams. The teams I remember were the Honolulu Engines, I believe, the Rising Sun. They were like an all-Japanese team. The Puerto Ricans, all Puerto Ricans.

SH: Uh-huh.

WE: Okay. Well then, that's, that morning, I heard this clanging noise. There was a man who slept just above the magazine, where the ammunition was stuffed.

SH: Okay, you were sleeping?

WE: That's right. And here's this blast, here's this noise. Incidentally, my friend, who slept above me, was six foot four, fellow by the name of Keith Borg. And all he did was read poetry. Big boy, could have been a fantastic fullback, or something. And I shouted, "What the heck's going on?"

And of course, the response was, "They're bombing the shit out of us."

I says, "Who?"

"We don't know."

So immediately, we had our battle stations. So up we go, up the battle station. I . . .

SH: Where, where was yours?

WE: I was on the port side of the *WHITNEY*, on the boat deck. But anyway, I want to go back to where we come up to starboard side. So I was two decks down, got to the main deck, up another ladder to the boat deck. This starboard side, looking out to where the *ARIZONA* was. And by this time, maybe the attack was under for five, six, seven minutes. And this I could honestly say, unless somebody could dispute it, that the bomb, about that time, went right down from where I was standing, or we were standing, that the bomb went right down the stack. Now, I could be mistaken, see. But immediately, we run over to our battle stations. Now, we have five destroyers tied along side. The *CONYNGHAM*, the *TUCKER*, the *CASE*, the *REID*, and the *SELFIDGE*. And of course, our five inch guns was on the boat deck, adjacent.

Now, this was a surface gun. It was not an anti-air. It probably couldn't move up or down more than ten or fifteen degrees. But of course, we had to stay at our battle station.

SH: And your battle station was?

WE: On the port side, there on the boat deck, on this five inch fifty-one caliber.

SH: Okay.

WE: And it took like about ten or twelve men to man the gun, 'cause this must have been a World War I gun. We had like about five shell men. We'd have to pass the shells. Same with powder men. And then we had the man there with a big ramrod. Okay. So that's where we were.

Now, during the attack, of course, we were restricted to our battle station. Now, during the attack, after the, the planes come in, the torpedo planes dropped their torpedoes and the bombers dropped their bombs, now these planes, whether they were the same planes or not, would just skirt the channel and strafe. So if they came from the port side, we would run over to the starboard side 'cause we were shielded above. And if they came from the, from the starboard, we'd run to the port, but we had to stay out of the way of the other men, 'cause we did have anti-aircraft guns on there. At that time, we had some old, old three inch anti-aircraft and fifty caliber machine guns.

Well, being general quarters, we'd have -- this went on for quite a while. We had the first wave come in, second wave come in later, but yet we have to stay at our battle stations because there was word out. In fact, there was a radio station hooked up there somewhere, with a lot of propaganda, saying that they're going to, they're landing on Oahu, you know. And, oh, that scared us.

Now, the one thing, now at this point in time, we were not scared. It was just such a surprise, it's like watching fireworks. You could see all the air, all the planes flying over, up above. And there's some of the stories I've read, well, it's not really a serious confusion. But I'd say there was maybe eight, 10,000, easily. And in some of the stories they says that there was a bright, beautiful, sunny morning. Now, there . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes)

SH: You were saying it was a bright sunny day and the lights went out there.

WE: Yes, I see that.

SH: All right, let's pick it up again and . . .

WE: Okay, we go back to the *ARIZONA*, which is a big thing because everything revolves around that. Our organization, the Pearl Harbor Survivors', everything is the *ARIZONA* Memorial, this, that.

But anyway, when I got up the starboard side, up the boat deck, as w looked out, this dive bomber -- it was not a high flying bomber, what they call it, a horizontal bomber, sort of way up. And from where our, from where we were situated, it looked exactly like the bomb went down the stack. And of course, at that time, it was impossible to really tell whether we could hear anything, 'cause I would say we're only where from maybe quarter of a mile to a half a mile away, and that's not much when you're on water. And all of a sudden, there was a big puff, and all of a sudden there was just a lot of smoke. I didn't see any flame at the time.

SH: Did you have a reaction to that in particular or . . .

WE: Not, well no, it was just a, it was just like watching fireworks. See, it was such a surprise, we were not scared or anything at that point in time, right. So like I said, after a few seconds, you know, we, we ran over to the port side and we were at, at our five inch fifty-one caliber gun. As I says, it was, it was a surface gun. Okay.

So I'm not quite sure whether it was during the first wave or second wave. We had a group, a number of B-17s that were going to be flying into Pearl Harbor. And I guess that might have been the confusion. And they did fly. We were in the east loch, moored at the east loch in Pearl Harbor. And these airplanes flew between the mountains, or the hills, and the *WHITNEY*. And we had our five inch trained on 'em. We would have fired, except we could see the insignias and whatnot, but they were our planes.

And in the meantime, I guess, they did have, they were relaying information that they were our B-17s, see. Well, there was a lot of confusion, like I said, but at this moment, we still weren't scared. Our biggest fear was this -- and I've repeated this more than once. We had a planking deck, and our fear was that if we took a hit, that those splinters would just run in, you know, completely. And this is talk of young kids at the time. And we said if we were going to die, we'd like to just die immediately, instantly, rather than trying, maybe getting hit and having the slivers in our bodies and suffer from 'em. And that was our biggest fear at that time.

But that was it, but we joked about it. Maybe we wouldn't let on we were scared, nobody wanted to admit that they were scared. Well anyway, this took place during this period of time, you could see the planes over there, a lot of smoke and things like that.

And then an incident occurred where this one airplane was flying between Ford Island and where we were moored. And I found out today, September, or December 5, 1991, I just met a man that was on the USS *TUCKER* and he said that it was their ship. They fired at this plane and it looked, to me, it looked like it stopped dead in the air. The plane rolled and the pilot just rolled right out into the water. But other than that, it's difficult to say, you know, what had happened to 'em -- whether he was killed or whether he swam ashore and taken prisoner. That we couldn't tell, see.

So this continued and after the second attack, we still were required, we were at battle stations to stay, man our stations. And then about twelve o'clock, by that time, they start relieving some of us so we could get some rest. So now it's time to go down, down below decks and eat. Well, we found out there were two-man Jap subs in the harbor. And that, that was the beginning of the fear. We didn't want to go below decks. And immediately all that, about that time, I was on the starboard side of the boat deck, and there was a PT boat going by. And it was hamming this two-man sub. And of course, we had the USS *SOLACE*, the hospital ship, probably moored about three, four, five hundred feet from Ford Island. And the submarine went under the *SOLACE* and shut off their power, and remained silent. Now the, the PT boats could not use their depth charges, because of the hospital ship. And once again, it was just recently, 'cause I, I was puzzled of what had happened to the sub. Well

this man who was on the USS *SOLACE*, I met him again, another man today. I said, "What happened to those," you know. I said, "I never heard a word."

He says, "When our destroyers prepared to go to sea, the submarine followed the destroyers out to the channel, and at the channel exit, to the exit to the ocean, they had a net there."

And this man told me that when they got that far, they didn't open the net, and that's when they dropped the depth charges on these, the submarine.

Okay, so that, like was that after, well that was that afternoon. But it was like six and a half, seven hours after the sub, after the sub attempted to make their, make the escape. Well anyway, during the afternoon now, as time was going down, we're getting anxious, we're getting scared. We're hearing the radio reports, "The Japanese have secured the Philippines. They're going to land on Oahu."

We were shaky. And then, as it got dark, that's when we feared just about everything. We, we wouldn't even go below decks unless we had to go below decks. And that night, I had the four to eight watch on the three inch anti-aircraft gun, which was located just around the bridge of the ship. And approximately, I would say, six, seven o'clock -- now, you gotta understand, everything was blacked out and the word was that we would not fire unless we got word that they were enemy airplanes.

Well evidently, being nervous, somebody opened up and we shot down, I, I'm not sure whether it was six of our own airplanes that were coming in off the *LEXINGTON*, I believe. And . . .

SH: It was the *ENTERPRISE*, but . . .

WE: Well . . .

SH: It was the *ENTERPRISE*.

WE: Was it the *ENTERPRISE*? Okay. Cause there were several carriers out to Midway or Wake Island, and they were on their way back.

SH: And did you open -- you were on the gun crew then that . . .

WE: Yes, I was on that, and we liked to think that -- not liked to think -- you know, we got to speculating, well, maybe we were the ones that did it. But of course, when they opened fire, they probably had a thousand anti-aircraft guns.

So we could, I had that watch. I got off at eight o'clock, but during the interim, we're getting nervous, more nervous, scared and everything. And after I got off of watch, why, it was just fear all the way from there. And I've never told anybody this, but if you seen, well, like the man says, you grow up in a hurry when you're in war. If you want to see, like we like to think we were grown up men all of a sudden, shed tears, you know. I'd go up there by myself. You wouldn't do it in front of anybody. And I'm sitting up there -- and I had enlisted, you know, into the service, and I'm saying, "Now, well, I wonder if I made the right choice."

So I shed some tears, this, that and the other thing. And well, I can't remember now whether we slept, whether I slept or not. But the next day, we got a work crew together. Now, all during the night, we had people fighting fires, rescuing the men from the battleships, and the next morning early, we got a work crew together and when we went over to see whether we could assist. Well, we couldn't get near the battleships because the oil had covered the water and it was so hot, scorching hot. As I understand, a lot of the men died that way, because they were underwater, as they come up, the heat from the oil burning, I guess they almost died instantly.

So anyway, we went over to the, close to where the *WEST VIRGINIA* was. Now, this is something that I forgot, but one of my friends I saw today, he says, "Remember that Bill?"

I says, "No."

So we went over and all of a sudden, somebody gave us the word, "Get out of there. We think the *WEST VIRGINIA* is going to blow up."

So we hightailed it out of there, 'cause we couldn't do any, we couldn't help. So we went over to the dry dock. Now, the USS *PENNSYLVANIA* was aft and two destroyers, the *CASSIN* and the *DOWNES*, were, were in dry dock. So we got over there and we wanted to see what we could do to help. By the time we got there, why, most of the damage or whatever was cleaned up. Anybody that died, they had taken 'em. Of course, we did a little helping, but there wasn't much to help.

So okay. So we couldn't help, so what we did, the next thing we did, we went over to the morgue, looking for names of our shipmates and friends, to see whether they had perished, or whether they were at the hospital. So most of the day was spent doing that. So then we went back to the ship, and once again, we still had our battle stations to man and nothing happened.

Now this thing is so -- the next thing that strikes me is this, is that the USS *RALEIGH*, which was moored approximately where the carriers would have been moored. And the *RALEIGH* had taken a torpedo hit or whatever, and it looked like it was going to sink. And of course, we were destroyer tender and we had like ten divers there. So we immediately went over there, tied up to it and our divers went down and they built a wooden cofferdam, completely around the ship, for ballast to keep it floating.

And so the next thing that I remember is it got dark. I was, I was now on the, my battle station was five inch fifty-one caliber gun, port side aft this time. And it was a very, very dark night. And we looked out there and we saw a silhouette of a ship. And being radio-silent, no lights. We had everything ready to go. We were going to blast it out of the water. And they turned the spotlight on it and there was one of our yard tugboats coming along.

But anyway, we stayed there for a day or two to keep it, keep the *RALEIGH* afloat and whatnot. And thereafter was a case of repairing some of the destroyers that needed some help. Of course, most of the destroyers got under way that same afternoon, or the same day.

But then it was out -- well, it wasn't back to normal business, but yet we began servicing some of the destroyers. Now, we had a task force, I don't

remember for sure, but it consisted, I believe, of the USS *INDIANAPOLIS*, some destroyers, minesweepers, went down to either Johnson Island, or one of the islands that were approximately -- I'm guessing -- four or five hundred miles away. So they, they weren't too far from Pearl Harbor and when they come in, of courses, some of them, the destroyers needed service, so they stopped along side.

So the thing I remember about this, I had a friend of mine on the USS *LONG*. And I met him years ago and he said, "Gee, we were at the mouth of the, the channel," because in order to be considered being on Oahu, you had to be within three miles, the limit. Of course, my friend, he was boasting, I never said. This was early after the, after the war ended, we had gotten home. He said we were at the channel, but subsequently in our quarterly publication, they listed all the ships that weren't at Pearl Harbor. And sure enough, there it was, USS *LONG*, two hundred miles south of Pearl Harbor, and the like. But this, I'm just interjecting this. To me, it's like a bit of humor.

And then as we get older now, there's certain things you kind of forget and like being here for the fiftieth, it's really refreshing because we are talking to men that were on the *WHITNEY*, and it's surprising. There are certain things that I thought, well maybe I dreamt about them, or had nightmares. Then somebody will make a remark about something, and all of a sudden, our conversation is going.

So, so there we were at the cubicle, which lit in, at the Sheraton, which lists all the ships and, and the personnel that's going to be attending this fifty anniversary, here at Waikiki well, at Pearl Harbor, let's say, 'cause we're slated to go to the Punchbowl Cemetery and we're all planning to go there and out to Pearl Harbor. And another sideline here is, of course, the women, they're standing around wondering, what are you guys talking about? You, you keep repeating yourself. But what are you gonna do, as we get a little older, we forget things. We remember things. And it's very enlightening now. I have met some, some of the men I hadn't seen since '42, '43, and '44. It's like we never were separated. We could sit right down, say, "Hey, Bill, remember this man or this man?" And the like.

So it's very, very -- oh, this is, I wouldn't give this up for anything.

SH: It's great. Let me ask you one final question.

WE: Sure.

SH: What's your most vivid memory of that day?

WE: Of that day. That's -- I think it's that airplane, the Japanese plane that got hit by a shell from the USS *TUCKER*. Now, when the *ARIZONA* -- see, there was so much smoke and chaos in the area of the battleships. And even though I could see a big puff come up after the bomb went into the, as I said, into the stack, and at this time, you don't know where the noise is coming from, because anti-aircraft shells are going up and bombs are being dropped. So I wouldn't say that that was the most important. In fact, I never gave it much thought until years later. But when we saw this airplane get hit, and the pilot roll over and out, that to me, always stuck in my mind.

SH: Coming back after fifty years, what means the most to you?

WE: Meeting all my shipmates that are still alive. It's wonderful. It's unbelievable how many. Now, we, we, we, Pearl Harbor wasn't -- I mean, what we did at Pearl Harbor was fine. We always consider the ship we were on at Pearl Harbor was our ship, whether we were on there one month, or a year, or five years. But just for that one day, that is our ship.

SH: That's interesting to hear. I'm sure we only have a short amount of time left on this tape? If you don't mind, you mentioned, said you had a lot of pride in your ship. You mentioned a couple of nicknames, one for yours and one for your rival. Could we just . . .

WE: Oh yeah.

SH: . . . say for the record?

WE: Well, there are two ships here. The USS *WHITNEY*, which was the Vikings. It was commissioned probably in the middle, late twenties. And our sister ship was the USS *DOBBIN*. Now, meeting some of the *DOBBIN*, *DOBBIN* sailor says they, the nickname for the *DOBBIN* was called the "Dirty *DOBBIN*". And of course, I kind of kid some of the *DOBBIN* sailors and say, "Hey, you look pretty big, I'm not going to tell you unless you tell me the nickname, otherwise I'm not going to say anything."

SH: Well, we appreciate you sharing it on tape. We won't show it to any, any *DOBBIN* guys here and get you in trouble.

WE: You, you better not, 'cause they're pretty big boys. (Laughs)

SH: Really. Bill, I want to thank you very much for taking the time to . . .

WE: Okay.

SH: . . . to share your memories.

WE: I'm very happy. I hope maybe this might be some information in here that perhaps somebody could use.

END OF INTERVIEW